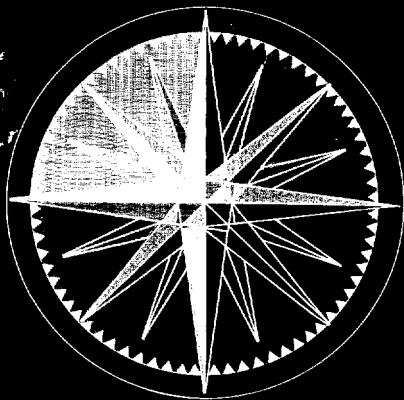


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SPECIAL REPORT

FOREIGN BUDDHIST REACTIONS TO SOUTH VIETNAMESE CRISIS

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FOREIGN BUDDHIST REACTIONS TO SOUTH VIETNAMESE CRISIS

The Buddhist conflict in South Vietnam has produced varying reactions in Asian countries having large Buddhist populations. Buddhism is not a monolithic faith, and practices differ widely among the sects. Sympathy for the Vietnamese Buddhists is general, but the degree of concern has depended primarily on political and sociological circumstances within the individual countries. The most vocal protest has been in Ceylon and Cambodia, whose governments have actively sought to focus world attention on the problem. Others--including Japan, Burma, and Thailand--deplore the Diem government's action, but have questioned the advisability of international discussions. The level of adverse criticism has risen sharply since the 20 August declaration of martial law and the police attacks on Buddhist pagodas, and support for joint action appears to be building.

Ceylon

For various reasons, diverse groups in Ceylon have found the South Vietnam situation politically exploitable. Buddhists comprise 70 percent of the island's population, and virtually all political organizations have felt it expedient to go on record in opposition to President Diem's handling of the Buddhist protest in South Vietnam. Reports of Buddhist persecution there, often distorted by local news media, have found a responsive audience in Ceylon.

First to act were Communist leaders, who condemned the "American puppet" Diem and last May organized a demonstration by about 15 Buddhist monks--all members of a Communist front group. Other organizations, primarily extreme nationalist Buddhist associations, held

rallies which aroused increasing support following the first Vietnamese suicide. Much of the press comment has been critical of the US, echoing themes that have been fairly common since the suspension of US aid to Ceylon last February.

Not unnaturally, there has been a tendency in Ceylon to tailor anti-Diem pronouncements to serve domestic ends. Concerned that the Communists would pre-empt the field, even the usually pro-Western United National Party felt compelled to condemn the Buddhist persecution in South Vietnam, adding a reminder, however, of Chinese activity in Tibet. Meanwhile, a Buddhist extremist group has waged a vitriolic campaign, ostensibly in response to the South Vietnam issue, but primarily aimed at Ceylon's Catholics, many of whom play key

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roles in the country's political and economic life.

Disturbed by opposition efforts to exploit the crisis in South Vietnam, the Bandaranaike government has avoided inflammatory denunciations, calling instead for a calm but critical investigation of the crisis and for international discussion of the problem.

The Ceylonese ambassador to the UN has been canvassing the delegations in New York to assess support for calling for a special session of the General Assembly. With the exception of Cambodia, which has reportedly also recommended Security Council discussion, most delegations have been only marginally interested. Many apparently feel that there would be little utility in such a discussion since South Vietnam, a nonmember, would not be greatly swayed by UN resolutions. There is also reluctance to allow a special session to interfere with the regular 18th session due to convene on 17 September. Nevertheless, if the South Vietnamese situation continues to deteriorate, sufficient support may be forthcoming to permit extraordinary consideration of the matter--which could not be discussed formally during the regular session until October.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Bandaranaike has been sounding

out interest in arranging an international meeting either of Buddhist leaders or of political leaders of the major Buddhist states.

Cambodia

Cambodia too is seeking international action. The reaction there to the Buddhist incidents in South Vietnam has developed against a background of long-standing antagonism between the two regimes.

Reports of the incident in Hué last May which touched off the crisis initially met with only moderate sympathy among Cambodian Buddhists, whose religion differs substantially from that of the Mahayana Buddhists of South Vietnam, and who are generally averse to the Vietnamese. On 1 June, however, Prince Sihanouk used the issue to lash out at the Diem regime. In a speech at a pagoda the Cambodian leader denounced Diem and protested that the Buddhist persecution included, among others, ethnic Cambodian Buddhists resident in South Vietnam.

Following the Sihanouk attack, press commentary rose to a higher pitch, and has remained extensive and bitter. While much of the Cambodian diatribe may have been politically inspired, the repression and immolations unquestionably

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have shocked Cambodian sensibilities. There have been public demonstrations, both in Phnom Penh and in the provinces.

On 27 August, following a border incident, Cambodia announced the termination of diplomatic relations with South Vietnam, citing both border difficulties and persecution of Buddhists.

Thailand

In contrast to Ceylon and Cambodia, Thailand has attempted to head off international discussion of the South Vietnamese Buddhist crisis. Prime Minister Sarit has expressed his willingness, however, to provide facilities for a conference of Buddhist states in order to avoid UN debate on the matter.

Popular reaction within Thailand has been strong. A US official reports widespread sympathy for the Buddhists and shock at the suicides. There is a general resentment among the Thais of the Diem regime's repressive policies and an anxiety that antiguerrilla action in South Vietnam may suffer. Moreover, Thai officials fear that the Communists may have some success in using the issue domestically for subversive purposes and to discredit the US.

Until recently Buddhist groups in Thailand limited their

statements to expressions of concern and refrained from attacking the Diem regime. On 31 August, however, some 2,500 Thai Buddhists met for five hours and adopted resolutions condemning the use of force against Buddhists in South Vietnam. A Radio Thailand broadcast of 28 August had sharply criticized the treatment of South Vietnamese Buddhists and stated that the issue had ceased to be an internal matter.

Japan

Japanese Buddhists, while disturbed by the news from South Vietnam, have also reacted with moderation. At a recent meeting representing most Buddhist sects, a relatively mild resolution was decided upon, calling for a negotiated settlement of differences and recommending the use of Japanese and US good offices. According to one Japanese official, the Buddhists themselves are wary of possible Japanese Communist attempts to use the issue for political purposes. Press coverage has been extensive, with most media assigning the blame to Diem and only a few criticizing the US.

Japanese Government leaders are increasingly concerned that instability in South Vietnam may work to the advantage of the Viet Cong and jeopardize the security of the entire area. Many apparently feel that the

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Diem government will be unable to contain the internal pressures generated by the crisis. The Japanese Foreign Ministry has reportedly advised the South Vietnamese ambassador of Japan's grave concern, but the Japanese Government has officially regarded the Buddhist problem as an internal South Vietnamese matter.

Tokyo has thus far avoided any commitment to moves by the Ceylonese and others for international discussions. However, fearing a further deterioration of the situation, the Japanese Government is reportedly considering a more "positive" response--as yet undefined--to Ceylonese initiatives.

Burma

Burmese Buddhists, preoccupied with domestic problems, until recently have paid relatively little attention to developments in South Vietnam. Their major concern has been to resist loss of status under the Ne Win military regime in their own country. During the past few months Buddhist attention has focused on the government's move to make national monuments of certain pagodas--a move which the Buddhists see as an attempt by the government to interfere with their religious activities. Buddhists' attention has also been diverted by a heated quarrel between Buddhist leaders and a doctrinal "reformer" who

has championed Ne Win's relatively secular approach.

Nevertheless, the Burmese press has widely reported developments in South Vietnam, and several Buddhist groups have directed protests and condemnations at Diem. These protests appear to be increasing, particularly since the declaration of martial law in South Vietnam. Student and leftist groups have also joined in issuing resolutions against the Diem government.

The Burmese Government has thus far given no support to efforts to convoke a meeting of Buddhist states to discuss the South Vietnam problem, but may be willing to cooperate in calling for UN discussions. Rangoon is apparently reluctant to allow a new precedent to be established for interference in a state's internal affairs, fearing that the door would thereby be opened for similar pressure on the Burmese Government at some future date.

Other Buddhist States

In other countries with significant Buddhist communities--India, South Korea, Laos, and Nepal--reaction has been fairly light. Remoteness or preoccupation with domestic problems have diminished the impact of the crisis.

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Nehru has sent a message to Diem expressing his concern at developments and passing on appeals from Prince Sihanouk and Prime Minister Bandaranaike. He has also reportedly agreed to attend an international conference on the issue, although he has expressed doubts about the usefulness of such a meeting. A small demonstration was held in New Delhi on 1 September, but the issue has otherwise aroused little popular excitement in India, where the proportion of Buddhists is relatively small and where public attention has been focused upon domestic political developments as well as the Chinese threat to the north.

In isolated Nepal, it is not likely that many Buddhists are more than vaguely aware of issues arising in distant South Vietnam.

Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has declined to comment on what he considers

a Vietnamese internal affair, adding that Laos has enough problems of its own. While he would prefer to avoid UN action on the matter, he would probably lend support to a mild resolution. He has also agreed in principle to Ceylonese proposals for an international conference, which he hopes would be limited to Buddhist leaders rather than government representatives. Popular feeling does not appear to be particularly aroused.

The reaction of South Korean Buddhists has also been mild, although there have been isolated protest demonstrations. A Seoul broadcast on 21 August, which probably reflects the South Korean Government's attitude, criticizes the Diem family for engaging in "a reckless policy of oppression against the country's Buddhists" which is likely to hamper the South Vietnamese effort to counter the guerrilla threat from the North. (CONFIDENTIAL)

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